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C O N F I D E N T I A L BRATISLAVA 001109

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CCA CHRIS SIBILLA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/06/2014

TAGS: PHUM PGOV LO CU

SUBJECT: SLOVAKIA ON CUBAN HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY

REF: STATE 262206

11. (C) Summary. In advance of reftel, poloffs had been discussing Cuba policy with a range of GOS and NGO interlocutors. GOS Cuba policy centers on the "critical dialogue" approach: The GOS must have contact with Cuban government officials to be prepared for an inevitable democratic transition and to maintain economic and commercial ties. GOS support for this approach has not changed despite frozen bilateral relations for over one year and a recent highly offensive letter from the Cuban Ambassador to the Slovak President of Parliament did much to fuel public opinion against the Castro regime. MFA Interlocutors argued that parliamentary leaders and NGOs have greater flexibility to support Cuban dissidents more directly. NGO activities include fund raising for the families of Cuban dissidents, awareness campaigns, and lobbying the GOS and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). Leaders in parliament have spoken out strongly on human rights conditions in Cuba. End Summary.

12. (C) Slovaks in both government and the NGO sector have been actively promoting human rights and supporting dissidents in Cuba for years. The U.S. can take some credit: the same activists that became "experts" on democracy through SEED funds are now exporting their experience to other countries that haven't yet made the dramatic leap to democracy and free market systems. However, most of the motivation for Slovak policy towards Cuba comes from memories of what it was like to live in a repressive regime, and from what happens afterwards.

The Government

13. (C) The MFA is feeling pressure from some EU members to warm relations with the Castro regime. On the one hand, the GOS wants to support dissidents and democratic transition. On the other hand, it knows that even when regimes topple overnight, institutions change slowly and bureaucrats remain in place. Current party members may be future democratic leaders; take for example Foreign Minister Kukan who studied in Moscow and began his diplomatic career as a representative of communist Czechoslovakia. Slovakia also wants to be competitive for commercial contracts in Cuba, and believes it has a better chance if it has good relations with the current regime.

14. (C) Oldrich Hlavacek, Director General of the Fourth Territorial Department, and Denisa Juristova, Desk Officer for Latin America and the Caribbean, told poloffs December 3 that the GOS cooperates with the GOC, while at the same time encouraging Slovak NGOs to engage Cuban dissidents. Slovak diplomats in Havana and Slovak government officials in Bratislava above desk officer level have had no contact with the GOC (except through diplomatic notes) since Fall 2003 when the Slovaks invited Cuban dissidents to an official reception. Hlavacek credited the Spanish initiative to weaken the EU's restrictive measures on Cuba with prisoner releases and warmed Cuban-Spanish relations. He said the GOS cannot leave a "black hole" in Cuba by ignoring political contacts in the country that will remain as part of the bureaucracy after a democratic transition. A viable dialogue is critical to a smooth transition of power.

15. (SBU) Juraj Kubla and Juraj Prituten of the MFA's Human Rights Department described Cuba policy as primarily driven by the common EU position. Kubla said the GOS supports the Honduras resolution and cited President of Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky's support for the September 19 Cuba conference statement in Prague. (NOTE: Hrusovsky also opened another conference on Cuban human rights the following week in Bratislava.) Kubla said the department preferred to focus on human rights concerns "closer to home," particularly in Ukraine and the western Balkans.

16. (C) Hlavacek could not foresee his government lobbying on Cuba issues in the UN. When asked about the influence the GOS will wield in 2006/2007 as a non-permanent member of the Security Council, Hlavacek replied that the GOS has defined the Balkans, Cyprus, the Middle East, and its neighboring countries as its priorities for the term.

17. (C) The DCM recently hosted the MFA's "EU team" for lunch and engaged them on maintaining the EU's restrictive measures. The EU countries were being handily manipulated by the GOC to decrease support for dissidents. Acting Director for European Affairs Fratisek Ruzicka was sympathetic to U.S. arguments. He mentioned that "playing nice" to the Castro regime has not resulted in any commercial benefits for

Slovakia, and that potential trade should not be the motivation for policy in this case. However, his view may not prevail in the MFA.

Parliament: "Critical" Dialogue is A Two-Way Street

18. (C) President of Parliament Pavol Hrusovsky, also Chair of the Christian Democratic Movement and a long-time opponent of communism, has been one of the country's most outspoken public figures on human rights in Cuba (see para 5). He recently sent a letter in support of political prisoner Luis Enrique Ferrera Garcia, describing the release of six dissidents as a "necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a change in the attitude toward the regime in Cuba." Cuban Ambassador to Slovakia Caridad Yamiri Cueto Milian responded to Hrusovsky's letter in classic fashion. Her harshly-worded letter made headlines with the statement, "the dignity and morals of the Cuban nation stand high above the misery of people like you." Op-eds argued that this incident alone was excuse enough to oppose the EU policy toward Cuba. Nonetheless, Hlavacek said that when FM Eduard Kukan convoked the Ambassador to indicate that such language was unacceptable, he only discussed diplomatic protocol and did not address the substance of the human rights letter that sparked the reaction.

19. (U) Another leader in parliament on Cuban human rights is Laszlo Nagy of the Hungarian Coalition Party (SMK). As president of the committee on human rights in Parliament, he traveled to Cuba last Spring to meet with dissidents with other parliamentary leaders from the Czech Republic and Sweden. He felt Cuba had been overshadowed by the events of 1989, which represented a lost opportunity to influence regime change. He commented that the Cuban dissident movement is much more organized than what existed in 1989 in the former Czechoslovakia. He informed poloffs that more investment into this group is urgently needed and further relaxing the isolation policy would be a clear victory for the Castro regime.

NGO Activism

110. (SBU) Eliska Slavikova from the NGO People in Peril and Milan Nic of Pontis Foundation detailed the activities of their organizations in support of Cuban democratization. People in Peril focuses on raising public awareness and grassroots support, while Pontis has taken a more political route. With support from a 2003 Democracy Commission grant, People in Peril organized several music and film festivals throughout Slovakia, published newsletters, and hosted discussion fora on human rights issues, several specifically on Cuba. The organization collected small donations at these events to support the families of Cuban political prisoners. People in Peril also encourages the Slovak media to cover Cuban issues.

111. (C) Nic described Pontis' activities to include "prisoner adoptions," lobbying the GOS, and supporting Cuban dissidents. The "prisoner adoption" scheme asks each political party to identify one political prisoner of the same party affiliation and coordinate public statements and fund raising on that prisoner's behalf. Pontis has asked both MPs and MEPs to consider this option. They have also lobbied the GOS to invite dissidents to diplomatic functions in Havana and opposed the choice of the new Slovak Ambassador to Cuba. Nic described the new Ambassador as a businessman "not connected with human rights concerns." He noted that Slovak trade with Cuba is small. He claimed a non-transparent 400 million USD energy project between the politically well-connected Slovak firm SEZ Tlmace and the Cuban government is driving the GOS' Cuba policy. He also said the 15 UN Caribbean votes that Cuba held influence over were an important part of Slovakia's bid for a 2006/2007 non-permanent Security Council seat. (NOTE: Slovakia has since won this seat, the top priority of the GOS' UN policy.)

112. (C) Comment: The GOS Cuba policy is trying to balance many interests: human rights and support for dissidents, potential to influence a future regime, promotion of commercial interests, and being a good EU team player. The gut instinct of Slovakia's top leaders is pro-democracy, pro-market economy, and pro-reform. Our challenge remains getting that instinct to come out around the tables in Brussels.

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